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PUBLIC STATEMENT

NIGERIA

Further releases of prisoners of conscience - a step forward

Amnesty International welcomes the government's announcement of the release of 17 more political prisoners. These releases bring to more than 60 the number of political prisoners freed since General Abdulsalam Abubakar came to power.

The organization urges the new Head of State to go further and release the dozens of prisoners of conscience still held, including Moshood Abiola, winner of the 1993 presidential elections. This would make his stated commitment to human rights a reality in a country where human rights issues are at the forefront of international attention.

On 25 June the government announced the release of 17 named prisoners who included 10 political prisoners charged with treason in March 1997 and seven political detainees held without charge or trial. At least five political detainees have also been released unannounced in recent days.

Also on 25 June the High Court in Ibadan, some 130 kilometres north of Lagos, discharged 33 of those arrested following pro-democracy protests on 1 May in Ibadan in which seven demonstrators were reportedly shot dead by the security forces.

DETAILS OF PRISONER RELEASES

Ten of those whose release was ordered by the government on 25 June are from a group of 12 who had been imprisoned for up to three years for alleged involvement in bomb attacks in Nigeria in 1995 and 1996. However two of the defendants, Dr Adegbenga Adebunsi and Bayo Johnson, were not on the list of those released. They were charged with treason in March 1997, along with four prominent pro-democracy exiles who included Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, apparently to discredit the pro-democracy movement.

Of the 10 released, two were leading pro-democracy and human rights activists: **Dr Frederick Fasehun**, a medical doctor and Acting Chairman of the Campaign for Democracy, and **Chief Olu Falae**, a former Secretary to the Government of the Federation, a former Minister of Finance and leading member of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), a coalition of pro-democracy and human rights groups. Six others, **Moses Akere Akinnola**, **Oluyinka Festus Adeboye**, **Femi Adeyemiwo**, **Layi Odumade**, and **Olugbenga Odumade**, had personal associations with victims killed in a November 1996 car-bomb at Lagos international airport who were subsequently accused of being bombers for the pro-democracy opposition. Three others,

Mohammed Sukere Lafiagi, Musa Okoiyafo Yasin and Moshood Yahaya, had been arrested on suspicion of involvement in a bomb attack in Ilorin, Kwara State, in May 1995, and kept in detention despite court orders for their release.

Six of the prisoners whose release was ordered on 25 June were released from detention without charge or trial under the State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree, No. 2 of 1984. **Captain Moshood Adekunle Raji** is reported to have been detained since 1997 solely for expressing his political opinion to a foreign government. **Alhaji Abubakar Rimi**, a former civilian governor of Kano State, northern Nigeria, and **Alhaji Sule Lamido**, a political associate, were arrested in February 1998 because of their criticism of plans for General Abacha to remain in power after the "transition to civil rule" scheduled for October 1998. Three others had been arrested following pro-democracy protests in May 1998: **Olisa Agbakoba**, a human rights lawyer and convenor of the United Action for Democracy, the coalition of groups which organized pro-democracy marches in March and May 1998; **Chief Ayo Opadokun**, lawyer and NADECO Secretary General, previously detained without charge or trial for two years from 1994 to 1996; and **Olusegun Maiyegun**, a leading member of the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights and the Campaign for Democracy.

At least five other political detainees have recently been released unannounced: **Ebun-Olu Adegboruwa**, a human rights lawyer detained since November 1997; **Dr Arthur Nwankwo** and **Dr Udentia O. Udentia**, leading members of the Eastern Mandate Union (EMU), a pro-democracy group in eastern Nigeria, who were arrested on 3 June 1998; and **Benedict Chukwuma Eziagwu** of the United Action for Democracy. On 26 June 1998 **Isaac Osuoka**, a leading member of Environmental Rights Action, an environmental rights group, was released after being detained without charge or trial for a month. His lawyer, **Bamidele Aturu**, had been detained without charge for more than a week after he sought his client's release on bail.

Those discharged by the High Court in Ibadan included three charged with arson and rioting: **Alhaji Lam Adesina**, a former senator and currently Secretary of the Oyo State branch of Afenifere, an association of the Yoruba ethnic group predominant in southwest Nigeria; **Alhaji Lateef Akinsola**, National Vice-Chairman of the National Union of Road Transport Workers; and **Femi Adeoti**, editor of the *Sunday Tribune*, an Ibadan newspaper, also charged with sedition. Lateef Akinsola and Femi Adeoti had been released on bail on 4 June. **Ola Oni**, a leading member of the United Action for Democracy who was released on bail on 23 June 1998, still faces charges of unlawful assembly and sedition.

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Nine other releases are also detailed in Amnesty International's public statement, AFR 44/34/98, 16 June 1998)